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ABSTRACT

This speech acknowledges that competency-based education is prominent today because the general public seeks accountability; it wants results in education. After cautioning about the danger of reducing the humanities to a measurable system, the report points out how behavioral objectives can relate advantageously to the teaching of English. It states that objectives are particularly helpful in the analysis of the nature of competence in the language arts and for the evaluation of student writing. Several examples of evaluation processes are included in the speech. No methods for applying this system to the study of literature are offered. Over 400 articles, addresses, books, and study guides written in the past ten years formed the basis of this address. Notes are included that cite a number of these sources. (MAI)

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Competency - Based Education:

Promise and Danger

An Address Presented at the 28th Annual Meeting
Conference on College Composition and Communication

Kansas City, Missouri

April 2, 1977

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I

On April 24, 1970, at the meeting of the Northeast Regional Section of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, held in Boston, I smugly listened to the keynote address of Bob Hogan, who had recently assumed the position of Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Mr. Hogan spoke about the unrecognized dangers of adapting the principles of behavioral psychology to education. He warned us to beware of the behaviorists, whose rapid ascendancy in the operation of our nation's schools and colleges would, he predicted, result in an almost-as-rapid descendancy of humanistic studies.

I said that I listened "smugly" to his words, and I did, for the faculty at my college, after two years of resistance of every imaginable variation, had all but destroyed an administration-imposed "systems approach to education." So, as Mr. Hogan admonished his audience to stay alert, I said to myself, "The problem is solved; the danger is past." I returned to my college, taught my courses, and watched the educational world roll by, assured of, not only the longevity, but the infinite eternity of the humanities.

Scene two takes place in November, 1974. I am in the library paging through Intellect magazine when I discover an article entitled "The Death of the Behavioral Objective Movement," by Morton Alpren and Bruce G. Baron. Let me quote a passage from this article, a passage which, when

I first read it, only confirmed my complacency;

By extending its claims, the (behavioral objective) movement becomes a panacea that will prove unacceptable to practitioners and the public alike in the near future. It simply does not have the universal application claimed, and much of what is considered central to education lies outside its scope. An umbrella for efficiency and prescription cannot encompass goals for humaneness.... It is hard to see how one can be--or that one would want to be--efficient about growth in feelings, emotion, and related attitudes.¹

But now we're in April, 1977, and as I look back over the past years, I conclude that Hogan was right and Alpren and Baron were wrong; the behaviorists are indeed taking over.

It may be true that practitioners have rejected behaviorism, but I believe the general public is only recently becoming aware of it. The taxpayers want results; the people want their money's worth. It is, therefore, perfectly understandable why state departments of education, local boards of education, boards of trustees, public foundations, PTA's, and student groups respond favorably to educators who promise not only a result, but a method of certifying the value of that result.

It's not usually called "the systems approach" anymore. More recent labels include "performanced-based education," "output-oriented education," "consequence-based education," "proficiency-based education," and even "criterion-referenced education." The most widely used term, the one which seems to be coming into more general use, and the one which I will use generally is "competency-based education," or CBE.² But, call it what you will, it is behavioral psychology applied to education, and it is very much alive. To prove this, let me cite four examples:

1. My home state, New Jersey, was one of the first states to involve itself in the competency-based teacher certification movement.³ The concept was first recommended by the State Board of Education back in January of 1969. By June, 1970, sixteen task forces had been created to develop and specify performance criteria. In his first annual message to the legislature, Governor William Cahill announced, "Certification in the future will be awarded on the basis of demonstrated competence to teach."⁴ Now who can argue with that concept? As a taxpayer and father of five children in public elementary and high schools, I certainly want in the classrooms only teachers who are competent. No, my argument is not with teaching competence; it is not even with behaviorism per se.

It is with some of the applications of behaviorism by incompetent politicians and educators. But, before getting into that, let me give a little more history.

2. As of 1972, fourteen states were actively working with competency-based teacher certification requirements, and seventeen other states had passed or were debating enabling legislation to do the same.⁵
3. That same year the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education sent out questionnaires to 1200 teacher-training institutions across the country. Of the 719 which responded, 125 indicated the existence of a competency-based program, 366 were in the process of developing such programs, and only 228 reported no involvement with CBE.⁶
4. By the end of 1973, thirty-three states had some form of legally required competency-based education and/or certification programs, and the movement was beginning to spread from teachers' colleges to liberal-arts colleges and to elementary and high schools.⁷

And so the trend among the politicians to require CBE by law continues, in spite of warnings from even the proponents of the movement, such as the following passage from a CBE-oriented book, Becoming Involved in Teaching, indicates:

Currently, the lack of a research base for most CBTE programs is a severe weakness. The rapidity at which state legislation is mandating CBTE programs is frightening.⁸

Thus, we can see that competency-based education is, in the words of Dr. Richard Meeth, Consultant to the National Task Force to Competency-Based Education, "no educational fad. Because it is motivated by external forces seeking accountability, it is expected to have a long life."⁹

II

Having warned you, or rather reminded you that Bob Hogan warned all of us seven years to beware of the behaviorists, let me now attempt to define this thing which I fear and yet am nonetheless attracted to. In so doing, I hope to relate CBE to behaviorism and note some of the differences claimed by proponents of its various labels—performance, proficiency, output, etc.

Allen Schneider, writing for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, called CBE

A system of education which places high emphasis on the specification, learning, and demonstration of those competencies which are of central importance to the effective practicing of a given profession or career.¹⁰

Roger Place, of the Norfolk, Virginia, public schools system, called it

...an information system designed to provide instructional data to interested parties. The interested parties, eager to measure educational attainment, include students, teachers, administrators, school boards, and community members.¹¹

James Propham's "Practical Ways of Improving Curriculum Via Measurable Objectives," identifies four stages in the design of a "criterion-referenced" learning model:¹²

1. Specifying objectives;
2. Pre-assessing the learner to see where he is in relation to the objectives;
3. Designing some kind of instructional sequence;
4. Evaluating whether or not it worked.

Schneider's delineation of CBE is somewhat more detailed. He lists seven characteristics which, he claims, distinguish it from other behavioristic approaches because they provide a total learning system:¹³

1. Precise objectives are stated in behavioral terms;
2. The criteria to be applied in assessing the competencies of the students are made explicit and public--and negotiable;

3. The students are held accountable for meeting these criteria;
4. Decision-making regarding the training models is based on the successful mastery of objectives;
5. The instructor is held accountable for the effectiveness of the planned program;
6. Achievement of objectives is held constant, while the time factor is varied (in other words, the quarter/semester system would be sacrificed to permit a student to stay in a course as long as necessary);
7. Emphasis is placed on exit requirements with considerable flexibility in entrance requirements. (This last characteristic is particularly significant to the open-door college which has no control over the entry levels of its students.)

Other advocates of CBE have done similar breakdowns of the CBE approach, but none differs substantially from the two which I just cited. However, the word "competency" itself is used differently by several of the proponents of CBE. While most insist that a competency is significantly different from a behavioral objective, the nature of this difference is not always clear. Kenneth Henson, in "The Myths of Competency-Based Education," distinguishes a com-

petency from a behavioral objective by its lack of concern with the number of times a skill must be performed to demonstrate mastery.¹⁴ He regards the frequent specification of this number-of-times factor as an artificial feature of the behavioral objective. This is, however, a narrow distinction compared with that implicit in Meeth's definition of a competency as

...the minimum knowledge, skills, values and/or attitudes a person can be judged or certified to possess based on a set of criteria or level of expectation.¹⁵

This conclusion of values and attitudes, and even knowledge, clearly distinguishes Meeth's definition of a competency from the usual understanding of a behavioral objective.

Schneider also envisions a competency as something much broader than a behavioral objective. CBE, he says, calls for cognitive as well as behavioral objectives, and he defines cognitive objectives as "...those which specify behavior of the learner relating to the preserving, understanding, processing, or using of knowledge."¹⁶ Like Meeth, Schneider regards values, feelings, and aspirations as legitimate elements of competency.

Richard W. Burns of the University of Texas, makes a further distinction between competency-based and performance-based approaches:

"...performance [means] 'the product of a behavior,' while competency means 'the behavior plus some additional standard,' which implies performing well."¹⁷

But not everyone working in the field makes such distinctions, or any distinction at all. Ervin Harlacher, for example, who was the founding president of Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, one of the first colleges in the country (1968) to be designed totally around the systems approach, insists upon the rigid establishment of specific, measurable behavioral objectives for every goal in a learning prescription. Yet he describes Brookdale's clearly behavioral program in an article entitled "Competency-Based Learning Systems."¹⁸

III

Let's re-cap.

We have seen, first of all, how behaviorism continues to dominate the educational world, though we now call it competency-based education or some other name, rather than the systems approach or behavioral objectives. We have seen how CBE, at least to some of its advocates, has gone beyond the rather narrow skill-oriented purview of the behavioral objective by adding cognition and values to its list of goals.

Now the final question to be considered is: how does all this relate to the teaching of English? I will try to

answer that question in two ways: (1) An analysis of the nature of competence in the language arts; and (2) objective (i.e., unbiased) evaluation of student writing. For the first of these, I have no direct experience in preparing lists of competencies and therefore can only report the findings of my research. For the second, however, I have been personally involved and can share with you some practical experiences.

Earlier, I mentioned that a number of colleges in the country have adopted total CBE systems; others have developed CBE for specific programs of study, e.g., teacher education, or in specific departments.

One Ph.D. candidate, Dorothy Behenke, used an interesting approach to identify the nature of competency in language. She constructed a questionnaire, consisting of a standard (Bloom, Krathwohl, and Masior) taxonomy of cognitive and affective learning categories and sent this to 248 English majors at her university. Her 1974 dissertation, entitled "The Meaning of Competency for an English Major on a Competency-Based Curriculum in a Liberal Arts College as Perceived by Practitioners,"¹⁹ reports the findings and identifies seventeen competencies regarded as essential by former English majors.

At Northern Montana College, objectives have been specified for each course, and a list of learning activities, along with another list of evaluative criteria, has been

composed.²⁰ For example, for the course called Communications, one of several performance goals (i.e., competencies) is stated as follows: "The student will be able to express himself clearly through writing." This goal is re-stated in behavioral terms: "Using the news media as a source of information, each student will write 8 essays analyzing and interpreting news articles." The list of five activities includes lectures, TV, radio, news media, class discussion, and the writing of additional essays if no improvement is demonstrated on the original after 3 attempts. There are two means of evaluation. The first is "assessment by professor according to following criteria: (1) Essay approximates the quality of...essay examples; (2) Essay is based on article attached; (3) Individual's analysis of news article; and (4) Spelling and grammar errors must be corrected with 95% accuracy before the given grade is recorded." The second evaluative criterion is "Final approval required on each essay before beginning a subsequent essay."

Some of you may regard this kind of detailed course breakdown as so many words on a piece of paper. Others may see it as helpful to both students and teachers. In either case, however, I don't think it represents anything different enough to be afraid of. The key, of course, is the essay examples referred to in the assessment criteria and the kind of subjective (non-behavioral) method the professor would use in determining how closely the student essay "approximates" the examples.

A more objective, but certainly not innovative, approach to the problem of evaluating competency was reported by Carol Gene Braunlee. She used a series of multiple-choice items to test objective performance.²¹ Here's an example of a concept objective: "The student will be able to recognize sentences utilizing commas to set off words in direct address." One of the test questions is: "In which sentence is the speaker being derogatory to the person he is addressing?"

- a. Dope Harry, and George will be upset.
- b. Dope, Harry and George will be upset.
- c. Dope, Harry, and George will be upset.

Such a method of evaluation, it seems to me, is not satisfactory because, as with any multiple-choice test, a low score may indicate poor reading ability rather than failure to understand the use of the comma. An item like this can be an effective teaching tool or an interest arouser, but I suspect that people who believe it actually tests what it's designed to test are the same people who tried to sell us programmed textbooks and computer-assisted instruction.

In preparing this report, I waded through more than four hundred articles, addresses, books, and study guides written during the past ten years. Though I read in many of these that entire colleges or entire English departments had switched over to CBE, I couldn't find a single, concrete explanation of how it's supposed to work in literature

courses. Its principal demonstrated application seems to be in skills rather than in concepts, in spite of the broader claims of its proponents. The most extensive work that I know of has been done by Thomas Gripp and Anna Marie Thames at Golden West College in Huntington Beach, California,²² although we are in the process of incorporating some composition evaluation features of CBE into the curriculum of Essex County College.

One of several early attempts which we made at Essex to evaluate student compositions can be seen on the handout labeled "Exhibit A." The first thing you will see--and perhaps disagree with strongly--is that 50% of the grade seems to be determined by mechanics, compared with 25% for composition format, and 25% for length. You might do it differently. So do I. But you will discover, if you attempt some kind of standardized evaluation sheet, that you will have to make some basic decisions about composition values: What is important? How much should mechanics count?

Let me explain how this evaluation sheet was intended to be used. First, the teacher reads the composition and, disregarding mechanics and length, makes a subjective decision as to whether it's worth an A, or a B, or a C, D, or F. If it's an A paper (that is, if its unity, logic, coherence, and other composing skills are of A quality), the teacher gives it from 22 to 25 points and places that number in the box to the right. Then he makes a similar, subjective judgment about

the paper's length (Is it long enough to prove its thesis? Are all the paragraphs sufficiently developed?) and puts an appropriate number in the second box on the right. Next, beginning with a 50-point maximum, the teacher deducts points for mechanical errors: 5 for each fragment, 3 for error in subject-verb agreement, etc. The remaining score is placed in the third box. Finally, the three numbers are added together to arrive at the "Total Percentage of Accuracy," and this number represents the paper's final score.

This number has two uses. It becomes a meaningful number when we specify that a student must write compositions with 75% accuracy to pass the course with a C, or 95% accuracy to get an A. Or, if used to evaluate a final performance exam, we could make recommendations as follows: 75% or better, advance to English 102; 50% to 75%, repeat English 101; below 50%, take a remedial course.

Obviously, an evaluation instrument like this is crude at best, and unfair and arbitrary in the judgment of many teachers, myself included. But it was, as I said, an attempt to objectify and make more uniform the evaluation of student writing. After all, an Essex County College student should not get a D from me and an A from another professor; there should be some degree of standardization from one section of a course to another.

The major problem with Exhibit A and evaluation sheets like it, is that mechanical errors can be counted and other

kinds of composing problems cannot be. Thus we tend to become error counters rather than true evaluators of the art of composition. A partial solution of this problem--though many of you will still not be satisfied with it--is to assign numerical values to the non-mechanical aspects of the composition process. An example of this can be seen in Exhibit B. This is a copy of a form developed by Gripp and Thames at Golden West College, referred to before. We made some modifications on it at Essex, but I feel that credit should be given to the originators.

As you can see, it's divided into three sections--content, organization, and grammar, with the addition of a section called "gross error penalties." The teacher makes subjective judgments about the essay in sixteen categories and then counts the fragments and comma splices. If the descriptive term in the middle column describes the student's paper, the teacher makes a check by the word and doesn't count any points. (The higher the number of points at the end, the poorer the grade.) If, for example, a student's "achievement of objective" is not "superior," but "above average," the teacher places a check in the "above average" column and counts one point. Similar judgments are made in each category, then eight points are added for each "gross error," and the total score is added up. The point assessment is then matched with a letter grade for the student's score. You can see that a paper with a total point score of from zero to eight points would receive a grade

of A, while a paper with more than thirty-two points would fail. Thus it is conceivable that an extremely well written, well composed paper which earned the highest judgment in each category but had a single fragment, could still be graded A, while a paper that was average (2 points each) in all categories, but had no gross errors, would get a D.

I have personally corrected more than a thousand student compositions with a grading sheet similar to this, and I found it useful in many ways. However, the obvious objection is still the use of numbers. Why should a sentence fragment be scored 8, and not 6 or 10? Or 1 or 15? Is it fair that a single run-on sentence in a 250-word essay drop the score as much as a single run-on in a thousand-word essay? Why not count four points, or five, for any check in the "unacceptable" column? These questions are not easy to answer, and if that bothers you, you could never be comfortable using such an instrument for evaluation.

Finally, let us turn to Exhibit C. This is an evaluation sheet developed by the English faculty of Essex County College. It is used to evaluate the first and the last paper each student writes. Initially, it serves to indicate to both student and teacher the areas of strength and weakness. A student gets his first paper back, notes the checks, and knows what skills he has to work on in particular. The checklist serves as an individual learning prescription, and he has the right to demand instruction in his weak areas. The teacher takes the

completed checklists from his entire class and decides how to apportion class time for the semester, who needs special tutoring, who can be excused from certain classes, and so forth. The system can be very useful, especially when printed on carbon-sensitized paper so that the student keeps one copy and the teacher keeps the other.

You will have noticed by now that no numbers are used on this evaluation sheet. It is not, then, uniformly objective. However, there is still some minimum uniform standard that must be met, as seen by the starred entries. As the footnote explains, a check in any of the starred boxes brings an automatic "F" to the paper. There's no way around it, whether Professor X teaches the section or Professor Y. The student knows from the start that he must improve his performance in at least these areas. Of course, Professor X and Professor Y may differ in their judgment of how "unsatisfactory" differs from "development needed," but that disadvantage is offset by the advantage of not having to count errors and make unfair distinctions between long and short papers, and between papers which are sophisticated in construction but imperfect in grammar and papers which are perfect grammatically but cretin-ish in thought.

IV

Finally, a parting word: competency-based education will, I predict, be with us for a long time. The politi-

cians have latched on to it, and the public is demanding it. We, as professional practitioners of language skills, should naturally demand competence from our students. We should not pass them if they are not competent. Let us not, then, fight the goals of this movement, but rather the misguided, collective wisdom that tries to assign a number to a value to make it fit onto a data-processing card.

Futhermore, let us not, in our attempt to hop on the bandwagon, lose sight of the larger meaning of competence. Competence is much more than writing fragment-free sentences. Competence is doing something well; it is our job to teach competence.

Remember, if we fail to teach our students to write competently, we may follow the teachers of Latin and Greek who, a half century ago, scoffed at the notion of mass education and predicted it would never come to pass. They may have been right, but they were definitely wrong.

Notes

¹Morton Alpren and Bruce G. Baron, "The Death of the Behavioral Objectives Movement," Intellect, 103, no. 2360 (Nov., 1974), pp. 103-104.

²Allen A. Schneider, Competency-Based Education (Washington: American Association of College for Teacher Education, 1973), p. 2.

³Robert A. Roth, "Performance-Based Teacher Certification: A Survey of the States," mimeographed report, Bureau of Teacher Education and Academic Certification, Division of Field Services, New Jersey State Department of Education, Dec., 1972.

⁴Schneider, p. 40.

⁵Schneider, p. 10.

⁶Schneider, p. 11.

⁷Dorothy Myrill Behneke, "The Meaning of Competency for an English Major in a Competency-Based Curriculum in a Liberal Arts College as Perceived by Practitioners," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Walden University, July, 1974, p. 78.

⁸Quoted in Kenneth T. Henson, "The Myths of Competency-Based Education," The Clearing House, 49, no. 3 (Nov. 1975), pp. 123-24.

⁹"The Philosophy of Competency-Based Education," McPherson College, McPherson, Kansas, March 20, 1973. Quoted in Behenke, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰Schneider, p. 51.

¹¹Roger Place, "The Performance-Based Curriculum," Speech given before the National Association of Secondary School Principals Annual Convention, Dallas, Texas, Feb. 2, 1973. ED 077 118.

¹²Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 55, no. 355 (May, 1971), p. 77.

¹³Schneider, p. 5.

¹⁴Henson, p. 123.

¹⁵John Paul Strain, "Experimentalism," Modern Philosophies of Education (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 65-68. Quoted in Behenke.

¹⁶Schneider, p. 62.

¹⁷Educational Technology, Nov. 1972, p. 24. Quoted in Behenke, p. 1.

¹⁸Ervin L. Harlacher, "Competency-Based Learning Systems," Paper presented at Research Academy (Kansas City, Mo.), Apr. 29, 1974, pp. 7-8. ED 097 087.

¹⁹Behenke.

²⁰A. W. Korb and Joseph P. Callahan, Performance-Based Education at Northern Montana College, PBE Project, Northern Montana College, Havre, Montana, Aug., 1974. ED 096 292.

²¹Carol Gene Braunlee, " 'Competency' in Liberal Arts Education," Paper presented at the American Association of Higher Education annual meeting, Chicago, Ill., Mar. 11, 1974, p. 6. ED 090 812.

²²Lester Purdy, Compiler, "Instructional Objectives for a Junior College Course in Freshman English." ED 067 075.